Pakistan, official policy towards Afghan refugees has been justified by Islamic duty towards fellow Muslims in need of safe haven.

In 1989, the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran estimated there were 2.35 million Afghans within its borders. Most are working age men, unlike in Pakistan. As many as 2 million reside either in cities or semi-urban settlements. In addition, an unknown number of unregistered Afghans are migrant laborers and traders. Government policy has been to disperse and resettle new arrivals in the twelve provinces in the northern, eastern and central parts of the country, where there are labor shortages.[9]

The largest ethnic group of Afghans in Iran (at least 50% of the refugees) are Persian speaking Shi'ite Muslims from the Hazarajat region of western and central Afghanistan. Meanwhile, about 30% are Pashtuns from western and northern Afghanistan, while the remaining 20% are from various minority groups. Although Afghans are most concentrated in the border provinces of Khorasan and Sistan-Baluchistan, only about 3% of the refugees live in established refugee settlements in the eastern border areas. For the most part, these are newer arrivals who fled fighting and the difficult economic situation in western Afghanistan during the mid-1980's. Iran is host to eight Afghan Shi'ite political parties, but they have exercised less influence and control over refugee communities than have their counterparts in Pakistan, partly because of Iran's policy of dispersing refugees.

Most Afghans in Iran are relatively well-integrated into the local economy; they provide casual labor for the agricultural and building construction sectors, and semi-skilled labor for certain trades like roofing and leather tanning. Most major urban areas have thriving Afghan settlements, with their own small businesses, markets, mosques and schools. Afghans filled much of the labor deficit during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, when most of Iran's own manpower was mobilized for military service. They still occupy an important economic niche, due to the war's high death toll, and because many Iranian war veterans aspire to better paying urban jobs. Afghans who register with the government are given ration cards for the same state-subsidized food staples which are available to ordinary citizens; they also have access to free government health care and schooling. According to official figures, 100,000 Afghan children are enrolled in public primary and secondary schools throughout Iran.

Until the mid-1980's, Iran received modest international assistance for supporting refugees. This reflected the deep mistrust between foreign institutions and Tehran during the early years of the Islamic revolution. At that time, Tehran

insisted on self-reliance and having control over its internal affairs, and it also held misgivings about the impartiality of international organizations. More recently, Iranian authorities have been eager to receive international recognition and assistance for their generous treatment of refugees. U.N. agencies such as the UNHCR, World Food Program (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) do provide support for the smaller population of Afghans in established refugee settlements. Most of that assistance has gone for the care and maintenance of refugees in government-run quarantine centers, where new arrivals are registered and medically screened before they are transferred to their resettlement destinations.

Because of cultural and religious affinities, Afghans have generally been welcomed in Iran, much as they have been in Pakistan. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the establishment of the U.S.-Pakistan strategic alliance in the 1980's, Iran's policies vis-a-vis its Afghan refugee population were largely a factor of its opposition to super-power encroachment, as well as its aspirations to be the vanguard of Islamic revolution in the region. In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, and Iran's movement towards a more moderate and pragmatic foreign policy, Tehran's relationship with both Moscow and Kabul has been more conciliatory.

Iran's policies towards Afghanistan continue to be motivated by its concern to counterbalance Saudi, Turkish, and Pakistani influence in the region, and to oppose what it perceives as imperialist meddling by the United States. This theme has been particularly noteworthy since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, as Tehran has increasingly viewed itself as a vital economic, political and religious power in the Near East-Central Asia region. This has became all the more apparent following the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which resulted in the significant enhancement of Iran's international stature. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Tehran has moved quickly to establish close trade and cultural relationships with the newly independent republics of Central Asia.

In spite of Tehran's longstanding patronage of Afghan refugees, their continuing presence in Iran has produced some serious domestic tensions. In rural and semi-rural areas, in particular, Afghans and their livestock have had a fairly significant environmental and economic impact, placing considerable strain on rural infrastructure, pastures and rangelands, water and food supplies, and health and education services. This has led to rising negative sentiments on the part of the general public, which increasingly blames the Afghans for rising prices, increased crime, and social problems such as drug smuggling and prostitution. In

1990, national legislation was introduced which called for the concentration of all Afghan refugees in established camps, though it was not passed.

The influx of a million Kurdish refugees from Iraq during the spring and summer of 1991 overloaded the country's already stretched resources, and caused many Iranians to question their government's liberal policies towards Afghan refugees. A recent depression has exacerbated domestic tensions, and an increasing number of Afghan returnees from Iran cite poverty as the main reason for their decision to come home.

In 1991, Tehran still perceived an interest in maintaining its liberal refugee policies, although reports indicated that the government had tightened its restrictions on movement within the country, and many unregistered refugees were detained and deported. Not only has Iran's Islamic approach towards officially recognized refugees earned considerable international favor, but the Afghan refugees have made a positive contribution to Iran's economy. Furthermore, the Afghan refugees, the majority of whom are Persian-speaking Shi'ites, have helped create a more favorable (from the government's point of view) ethnic balance in Iran's multi-cultural society, which is not without its own nationality tensions. Finally, Tehran sees the presence of the refugees, as well as of the Afghan political parties in exile there, as useful levers for ensuring improved socio-economic standing and an enhanced political role for Afghanistan's Shi'ite minority.

The Internally Displaced

Internally displaced persons (as opposed to those who have shifted their place of residence within Afghanistan through normal migration patterns) may be defined as: "those who have been compelled to abandon their native areas due to conditions related to the Afghan conflict, and who have not yet been able to return." This serves to distinguish the chronically displaced from the great numbers of Afghans who, at one time or another during the war have had to flee, but who have subsequently been able to return to their native villages or rebuild their homes in nearby locations.[10]

Even with such a definition, however, the true number of internally displaced people in Afghanistan is almost impossible to ascertain. This is largely due to unstable conditions as well as the complex political and social barriers which keep outside observers from getting local access.

Although some estimates run as high as 3 million, the most frequently suggested figure for the displaced population is approximately 2 million. That total is an approximation and stems from the observation that Kabul, and some of the larger provincial capitals like Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, Lashkar Gah and Kandahar experienced dramatic war-time population increases. For example, the 1978 population of Kabul is often placed at around 800,000 (pre-war figures vary as well). At the height of the war and the Soviet occupation (1984-88), estimates ran as high as 2.5 million for Kabul and its suburbs. Knowledgeable Afghan residents of Kabul assert that a fairly substantial portion of the city's population before 1978 either emigrated to the West or became refugees in the region. Therefore, the post-1978 increase must have been much higher than the presumed 1.7 million. The capital's large increase is mainly attributed to an influx of internally displaced people from the provinces.

Since the February 1989 withdrawal of Soviet troops, Kabul's population is said to have decreased somewhat, to around 2 million, with the return of many displaced to their places of origin -- and decreased flows of refugees to Pakistan and Iran.

While some other cities had unprecedented population growth of similar proportions, other important urban centers like Herat, which have experienced heavy fighting and continued insecurity, have suffered considerable depopulation,

with many persons fleeing to Iran and Pakistan, or to safer rural districts where they had strong political or ethnic ties.

The most difficult feature to measure is the extent of population displacement in areas beyond government control. Many who have been displaced several times over are now back in their native areas, while some have either settled in other rural localities or remain transient, unable to return to their places of origin. Despite the impediments to accurate estimates for this sector, some definite indicators of rural displacement are apparent.

Most often, displaced people in rural areas have sought refuge in areas under the control of strong *mujahedin* commanders with whom they have either ethnic ties or political sympathies. Those lacking such links may still seek commanders' protection and assistance in return for their allegiance and services as fighters or agricultural laborers.

The displaced in Kabul and other urban areas have also tended to reside among kinsmen from the same region -- many of whom are long-time residents who migrated from the countryside before the war. These urban displaced participate in a wide range of trades, businesses and occupations, but most apparently work as casual labor. For many, movement to the government controlled cities signified support for the Kabul regime, as in the case of party members, military officers and civil servants who fled provinces which fell to *mujahedin* control. For many others, however, the cities represent relative safety and better work opportunities, rather than symbols of allegiances.

Often, the direction of flight and choice of place of refuge for the displaced is initially a matter of proximity to temporary shelter. But in the long term, most often, such decisions are determined by ethnic, regional or political links to settled communities elsewhere. Other factors include: the degree and duration of physical danger; the level of destruction of houses, farmlands, livestock and means of production; the availability of long-term shelter and economic livelihood in nearby localities; and, the availability of resources for travel to Pakistan or Iran or other distant places of refuge.

To further complicate matters, the movements of Afghanistan's displaced persons have been quite fluid, and variable. Often, people fleeing localized fighting have first sought temporary shelter in the mountains or in safer neighboring districts, then returned to their homes once the immediate danger subsided. Those who have been uprooted because of the more complex economic disruptions of the war, however, have essentially resettled in the communities

where they have sought refuge. This is particularly the case in urban areas, which tend to be the safest, and have the most diverse employment possibilities. Many families have been split and widely dispersed by the conflict, with some members living in government-controlled towns, others remaining back in their home villages in *mujahedin*-controlled areas, and still others living abroad as refugees.

Displacement often occurs in stages, with people shifting from place to place, always seeking more stable places of refuge, relatively speaking, or better economic opportunities. In the countryside, displaced people who have been unable to find casual employment or land to sharecrop have migrated around the provinces -- gravitating eventually to towns, or crossing into Pakistan or Iran in search of jobs and international assistance.

Conversely, some former refugees who have returned to Afghanistan have found it impossible to resettle in their villages, and have migrated to towns or to other rural areas where they have been able to make a living. For example, two brothers in Feyzabad had recently returned from Pakistan, but were unwilling to return to their rural village because they feared the *mujahedin* in control there. They were living with their extended family in rented quarters, surviving by doing day labor in town. With some irony, they remarked that "we were refugees for many years, but now that we have returned, we have become internally displaced people, and there is no one to turn to for assistance."

Many of the internally displaced are from ethnic minority groups such as the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Turkoman. The explanation for this phenomenon, as with the general pattern of Afghan refugee movements, is that wherever possible, people fleeing fighting or economic disruption seek refuge among their own relatives or tribal kinsmen -- whether in neighboring villages, in urban areas, or abroad. Observers also suggest that refugees who belong to non-Pashtun minority groups have encountered hostility and discrimination in the predominantly Pashtun refugee settlements in Pakistan, and have thus felt more secure seeking refuge in the cities, or safe rural areas where their kinsmen are. In recent years, heightened tensions between ethnic groups, such as the Pashtuns, the Hazaras and the Uzbeks have led to an increasing violent clashes and population movements.

In a number of northern provinces, displaced Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks or members of other ethnic minorities have moved into districts traditionally dominated by their respective groups. In these instances, they have occupied lands settled during the early part of this century by Pashtuns -- who have themselves fled to Pashtun-dominated districts or to Pakistan or Iran.

As with the refugee communities in Pakistan, the majority of the internally displaced households appear to be predominantly women, children and older males. But the appearance of vulnerability in household composition can be deceptive. Although some families are headed by widows, or elderly men whose sons were killed in the war, the apparent absence of young men from the household does not accurately reflect the family composition. In many instances, family members are split up, living in various locations -- from the home village, the towns, or abroad. The young males are usually the most transient: they are either present (or off fighting) as members of the *mujahedin*, the militia or the government army; in hiding to avoid conscription; or, working elsewhere (usually in neighboring Pakistan or Iran) to supply the extended family with income.

In most cases, there are substantial links to the host community -- by virtue of extended family relationships, tribal ties, or allegiances to protecting local commanders. In most cases, they assure the displaced basic protection and at least the bare essentials of food and shelter.

Otherwise, the internally displaced are essentially on their own. Kabul authorities, as well as many *mujahedin* commanders, indicate that internal displacement is one of their most pressing socio-economic problems. It strains an already fragile urban and rural infrastructure, and the limited supplies in critical areas like food, fuel, water, land, housing, health care and education. Because the internally displaced often exist within larger settled communities, it is difficult to identify their specific humanitarian needs as those of a separate, affected population. Unlike those who sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran, these civilian war victims have virtually no access to international relief assistance.

HOMEWARD BOUND? EARLY SIGNS OF REFUGEE RETURN

Evidence of Return of Refugees

There are unmistakable signs that sizeable numbers of refugees have returned to Afghanistan, despite the difficulties involved measuring repatriation in quantitative terms, according to knowledgeable observers such as UNHCR field officers, workers with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and host country officials. In many refugee settlements, abandoned home sites with their precious roofing materials and the door and window frames removed are quite visible. Market activity and pedestrian traffic in the camps have noticeably declined from a year ago. Residents of refugee settlements confirm that people have been returning to Afghanistan -- but are often quick to add that the returnees are not from their own clans or villages.

UNHCR field monitors have observed and interviewed refugee families travelling by truck, across the Afghan border, laden with household belongings and building materials. Aid workers inside Afghanistan have noted increased local market activity, the building of numerous new homes, and many women and children in various districts. To date, most returnees appear to have returned from camps in Baluchistan province to their home areas in Kandahar, Helmand, Herat and Kunduz provinces, in southern, western and northern Afghanistan respectively. Repatriates from the North West Frontier Province have been most visible in the eastern Afghan border provinces of Paktia and Nangarhar, and in Kunduz in the north. Records from UNHCR's recent project to encash the ration passbooks of returning refugees confirms this pattern. UNHCR and Kabul government sources, as well as NGO project monitors, also report an increase in spontaneous returns from Iran to rural districts in Herat, Nimroz and other parts of western Afghanistan. However, since the UNHCR has no permanent presence in most regions of Afghanistan outside government control, it is difficult to verify or quantify repatriations in any of these areas.

An interesting aspect of recent return movements has been the use of reception and assistance centers established by Kabul officials in the capital and major provincial towns. Most refugees crossing the border make the greatest part of their journeys on their own, without assistance. Once inside Afghanistan, however, thousands have gone to the government reception and transit centers which are in 23 of Afghanistan's 29 provinces. Known as Peace Guest Houses,

these centers are administered by the Ministry of Repatriates. They provide returnees with identity papers and temporary food and shelter while they await transportation to their home provinces.

During the past three years, the number of returnees transiting the reception centers has been rising, averaging 2,000-3,000 persons monthly during the spring and summer travel seasons. According to the Afghan government, more than 250,000 people have returned under this program since its inception in 1986 -- a figure that knowledgeable observers believe is an exaggeration. Although it is difficult to verify Kabul government figures, the UNHCR has provided food assistance to over 50,000 persons who have transited the main government-run reception centers it has helped support in Kabul, Islam Qala, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Lashkar Gah and Jalalabad since June 1989.

Most of the returnees using these facilities have come back from Iran, although increasing numbers are from Pakistan. A smaller number are guest workers on their way back from the Persian Gulf. In 1989 and 1990, UNHCR reported that up to 90% of returnees from Iran were single males under age 35. Many of the repatriates are migrant workers who returned home for extended visits with families who remained in Afghanistan. Others are traders or couriers who convey money and gifts to Afghan families from relatives working in Iran. Recently, however, there have been more family groups travelling this route, suggesting that word has gotten back to refugee settlements in Iran that it is a viable avenue for return.

The journey from Iran to Afghanistan is not without considerable expense and personal risk. Border-crossing formalities appear to be irregular. Many returnees report being detained by Iranian border police and relieved of much of their money and personal belongings. Presently, neither the Government of Iran, nor of Afghanistan appears to be capable or willing to assist or protect Afghan returnees as they traverse the dangerous border no-man's land. Security is made all the more precarious by rival militia fighting for control of the roadways, which are subject to shelling or the laying of mines. Bandit attacks are common, and young men have been forcibly conscripted by militia or *mujahedin* groups which operate in the area. Most returnees report having paid much money to professional guides and smugglers to shepherd them from Iran to the Afghan government reception center at Islam Qala.

Since early 1990, Kabul authorities have airlifted returnees arriving in Herat who are destined for northern Afghanistan, or provinces near the capital. The airlift facilitates the onward movement of returnees, which would have been

impossible because of poor road conditions and chronic insecurity in much of western Afghanistan (widespread fighting and banditry, and the presence of land mines in some areas). From September through November 1990, UNHCR assisted the government in financing charter flights in order to reduce the large backlog of returnees who had overwhelmed the limited facilities at the Peace Guest Houses in Islam Qala and Herat.

The temporary aid and transportation assistance of the Peace Guest House network is particularly important to those who must make fairly arduous and long trips back home, and for whom resources are limited. Among those most heavily using these official transit facilities are returnees from Iran and Pakistan headed for northern and central Afghanistan, and more vulnerable groups, such as large families with women, children and elderly. The official route also offers a modicum of protection for repatriates who might otherwise be forced to travel through territory contested by various *mujahedin*, militia, or bandit groups. Reportedly, however, many younger men returning from Pakistan, fearful of being drafted into the Kabul army, choose to travel back through *mujahedin*-controlled areas.

Kabul authorities, citing their policy of general amnesty for all Afghans from abroad, deny conducting any political screening or surveillance of returnees. However, the obvious presence of state security cadres and police officials alongside of regular Ministry of Repatriates staff in the Peace Guest Houses indicates the regime's continued concern over possible infiltration by resistance agents. Such arrangements provide resistance parties with further justification for opposing repatriation as a Kabul propaganda boon. It is worth noting that Kabul authorities appear to have made little effort to restrict the movement of returnees, and many of those transiting the Peace Guest Houses have gone back to rural areas outside of government control.

INTRODUCTION

Years after the departure of the last Soviet forces, Afghanistan remains politically fragmented, torn by civil conflict, poor, and devastated. Twelve years of warfare have cost more than a million lives, and disabled hundreds of thousands. Over one third of the population -- perhaps as many as seven million people -- remain uprooted, either as refugees in Pakistan and Iran, or as internally displaced populations throughout Afghanistan.

The end of this uprootedness was near, with the withdrawal of the Soviet military in 1988, many in the international community once believed, thinking that:

- the communist government in Kabul would quickly fall to the Islamic resistance forces; and
- a new, broadly-based government would emerge to preside over the post-war reconstruction of the country.

However, they also warned that, without massive relief and reconstruction, Afghanistan lacked the infrastructure or resources to cope, and that a humanitarian crisis which undermined the stability of any new central government and provoked additional, wide-spread conflict would happen, unless massive relief and reconstruction assistance were provided. Moreover, the return of the millions of Afghan refugees could have destabilizing effects if the new government were unable to reintegrate them.

Shortly after the signing of the 1988 Geneva Accords, under which the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar appointed Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan as his Special Coordinator for Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programs Relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA), and appealed to donor countries for funds to mount Operation Salam, a large-scale international effort for fostering the return of refugees and national reconstruction.[1]

The Bilateral Agreement Between the Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Voluntary Repatriation of Refugees was a prominent part of the Accords.[2] Under it, both countries affirmed the right of refugees to return voluntarily and safely to their homeland, unimpeded by either side. Both also committed themselves to accommodating the refugee return, and cooperating to ensure an orderly repatriation. The agreement also called upon

Evidence of Return Among the Internally Displaced

The transience of the internally displaced population and the continuing instability in much of Afghanistan makes it difficult for outside observers to make quantitative assessments about return movements. Some have suggested that the return of the internally displaced may happen more easily because of the fact that they have been largely self-supporting, without any access to outside assistance and, therefore, are unvictimized by a dependency syndrome which might inhibit their motivation to return. Similarly, it has been argued that, having remained inside the country, they are free of political pressure and constraints that affect refugees.

In fact, however, the prospects for the return of the internally displaced are subject to many of the same complex factors which influence the repatriation decisions of refugees. Many who had fled fighting during the war were able to return home soon after the immediate danger had passed, if their homes and lands were undamaged. Thus, after the Soviet withdrawal, the population of Kabul and other large towns visibly decreased. Yet, this decline in the urban population is also thought to represent an outward displacement of city people, as they sought safety in rural areas or neighboring countries, due to *mujahedin* rocket attacks, the runaway cost of living in the city, and general uncertainty about the future.

Meanwhile, many of the displaced sought temporary refuge from fighting in safer rural areas inside Afghanistan, rather than moving to the cities or fleeing across the border. Because many of these areas are isolated, rural displaced have attracted less attention than urban. In one notable case, the powerful resistance commander of the Panjshir Valley region of northeastern Afghanistan, Ahmed Shah Massoud, actually prevented refugees from fleeing to Pakistan from areas under his control -- even at the height of Soviet bombardment. Instead, he had people relocated to safe mountain havens, and he encouraged others to migrate to the cities until the attacks on his area subsided. During the last two years, Massoud has encouraged thousands of refugees and displaced to return and rebuild their home villages as part of his strategy to create liberated zones in the north under his control.

U.N. and NGO assistance monitors inside Afghanistan have reported increasing movements of displaced back to Herat, Zabul, Ghazni, Paktika, and Kabul provinces, as well as to various districts in the Hazarajat region of central

Afghanistan. At the same time, recent ethnic clashes between Pashtuns and Hazara in Ghazni and Zabul provinces have caused several thousand more families to flee to safer areas.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RETURN

The question of refugee return to Afghanistan is as highly politicized and as deeply emotive as was the refugees' flight and their long years of exile. Complicated factors, including political, economic and social relationships, influence who will return, in what numbers and under what circumstances.[11]

International assistance planners must study the continuous, spontaneous movements of people back to Afghanistan -- be they permanent returnees or seasonal migrants -- to better understand the factors that will make safe return a viable prospect for more people. These considerations are crucial to the development of assistance and reconstruction programs that will enhance economic stability in the areas where people are choosing to return.

In examining why predictions of mass refugee returns have not materialized, when at the same time tens of thousands of persons have quietly begun their journey home, several determining factors become apparent. They affect individuals and groups relative to conditions in their places of origin, as well as their present circumstances in exile. It is likely that most refugees make their decisions based on several factors. According to refugees and informed observers, the most important are: conditions affecting physical and economic security in Afghanistan; conditions and future prospects in asylum countries; and socio-political factors which encourage or inhibit return.

Weighing the Risks and Prospects for Return: A Matter of Survival

It is useful to view the decision-making of Afghan refugees as similar to the manner in which peasant farmers are known to weigh the factors which can affect their basic survival. From that perspective, the refugee is "rational risk taker" -- he weighs not the prospects for material profit, but the risks and dangers associated with various courses of action. In situations of great uncertainty, the refugee head of family is unwilling to venture into tentative situations where there are few guarantees that he will successfully support and protect his family. This is especially true if the refugee's circumstances in exile are somewhat stable. In such a situation, the margin for taking risks or making poor choices are extremely narrow. Therefore, the refugee is inclined to view matters in terms of the well-being and survival of his family and he makes his decisions accordingly.

To Return or Remain: Collective versus Individual Decision-making

The decision to return is seldom made solely by the individual refugee or even by his or her family. This is because the concept of individual prerogative is essentially foreign. For Afghans, the group -- the tribe, the clan, the extended family -- or in more recent years, the political party or *mujahedin* -- defines and validates one's independence and identity.

A person's allegiance is partly a factor of his need for the group's protection and economic security. Correspondingly, the group's legitimacy and leadership is partly determined by its ability to provide for its members. Thus, individual, independent actions would deprive families of the protection and benefits of the group -- and, in turn, deprive the group of the manpower and resources which are its support system.

This pattern of patronage leads to a complicated set of relationships that influence return movements. In short, civilians are rarely free agents in the present conflict in Afghanistan. Virtually everyone resides under someone else's umbrella, with patrons and clients forming somewhat symbiotic relationships. Refugees and displaced people are extremely dependent on their protectors. However, in order to maintain such relationships, and to keep the allegiance of

dependents, protectors must ensure a relatively satisfactory level of security and largesse, as well as to offer protection from outside threats.

Refugees as Pawns of Politics

Asked why they have not yet returned, many refugees in Pakistan promptly reply that they are unalterably opposed to the communist regime of President Najibullah, and that they will not repatriate until there is an Islamic government in Kabul. As good Muslims, they indicate, they fled in accordance with the teachings of Islam: the faithful must flee the land if their lives and the free practice of their religion are endangered by infidel invaders or godless rulers.

Such pronouncements are most often made by the resistance politicians and religious leaders in Pakistan -- or in their presence, by refugees themselves. Refugee leaders and resistance politicians alike assert that the call for *jihad*, which arose during the earliest days of the communist revolution, did not end with the 1989 Soviet withdrawal. Instead, they argue that those who oppressed Islam and invited foreign invasion are still in power. Therefore, they reason, it would be "unIslamic" for the refugees to repatriate now, while the land is still under enemy rule.

It can be argued that resistance leaders have cynically manipulated the refugees for political ends, as they appeal to their deeply held religious faith. But in making the argument one can overlook the fact that many refugees do, in fact, carry a keen personal sense of having been victims of a cruelly oppressive regime, foreign invasion and a devastating decade of warfare. Uprooted from their land and way of life, they have relied on their faith, their traditions and their leaders, for a sense of purpose and hope. Hence, "self-censorship" has played an important role, with the refugee not only reluctant to incur the distrust and animosity of the group, but also needing a sense that there is purpose to his prolonged exile under difficult circumstances.

Nonetheless, international aid workers and Afghan intellectuals report increasing disillusionment and frustration. Many refugees feel that the war has gone on too long and that the *jihad* has, in fact, lost its reason for being, now that the Soviets are gone. Few Afghan peasants, or traditional tribal leaders, for that matter, have ever had much regard for any of Kabul's rulers. Historically, the

average Afghan has concerned himself little with national politics, as long as the country (and his valley, in particular) has been safe from outside invasion, and as long as Kabul has not grossly intruded on his local autonomy. If more stable conditions could be assured at home, and if people had the means to rebuild their lives, most would probably welcome the opportunity to go back home. Resistance politicians have tried to sustain the notions of *jihad* and *hijirat* among the refugees, but they probably excite the refugee population only to the point where they ensure them continued access to food rations and other assistance administered by the Pakistani authorities and Afghan resistance parties.

It would be difficult to describe the Afghan refugees as a "captive constituency," as has been the case of displaced Cambodians living in resistance controlled encampments along the Thai border. There are no barbed wire enclosures or armed guards to prevent their repatriation. At the same time, however, the "ties that bind" and the barriers to return are formidable.

Though they do not have to contend with physical barriers, lives of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are pervaded by fear and insidious repression. People are manipulated by the parties which control international assistance; the attitudes and agenda of the resistance are made clear through widespread propaganda campaigns and enforced through violence. Hundreds of moderate Afghan intellectuals and professionals have been assassinated, imprisoned, and abducted, because of their association with Western democratic ideals, their vocal opposition to resistance wrongdoings, or their promotion of women's rights.[12]

Publicly, most of the Peshawar-based resistance parties have firmly opposed repatriation. Using strident propaganda campaigns, they have described return as being traitorous to the *jihad* and serving the the Kabul regime's policy of national reconciliation. Indeed, early return to Afghanistan was seen as a threat to influence of Pakistan's most hard-line political parties which, along with agents of the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), have acted to stop repatriation over the last two years. At various transit points, roads have been blocked and travelers have been harassed, turned back, or, in many cases, taxed by armed groups. There have also been incidents of violence and physical intimidation. Such actions have probably had a chilling effect on some refugees' decisions to return.

Leaders' opposition to return indicates their own precarious political situation. Even at the height of the war, the Pakistan and Iran-based Islamic parties never exercised much influence inside Afghanistan. They did not enjoy popular support before the communists seized power, nor is it likely that they will

have it after a political settlement is reached. For them, the only power base is the control they have over the refugees. Thus, maintaining the status quo ensures them their positions; a broad-based political settlement and the large-scale return of the refugees to Afghanistan would be serious threats to their power.

Pakistan's political objectives have supported the resistance parties' hard-line opposition to repatriation. So far, Pakistan (and for that matter Iran) has not actively encouraged the refugees' return. In fact, the Pakistani military has supported the *mujahedin's* resistance to large-scale early return. Pakistan's longer-term goal, an objective that is beyond a *mujahedin* military victory, calls for an Islamic government in Kabul that is at least friendly, if not beholden, to Islamabad. President Zia ul-Haq, who died in 1988, was a staunch supporter of the Islamic Afghan resistance, and that legacy continues under the Pakistani military and ISI.

If the goal of an Islamic government cannot be achieved, influential elements in the military would prefer a weak and divided Afghanistan that would not threaten Pakistan's perceived security interests, according to some observers. They see the continued presence of the *mujahedin* parties in Pakistan as leverage over Kabul as well as the resistance.

But the Pakistanis are not completely comfortable with the prospect that many Afghans may never repatriate. Without resolution of the Afghan conflict in Islamabad's favor, some Pakistani officials are wary of a "Palestinian syndrome" developing among the refugees; they fear that, as an armed and disenfranchised mass of exiles, the refugees may pose a threat to public security in Pakistan, and their presence could foster latent aspirations for a "Pashtunistan" among Pakistan's large Pashtun population.

Under the leadership of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the Government of Pakistan (GOP) was deeply divided with regard to Afghan policy. Ms. Bhutto supported UNHCR efforts to launch a pilot repatriation project and appeared willing to consider a more conciliatory approach to Kabul and to U.N. efforts for a compromise settlement. Her ouster in the summer of 1990 is partly attributed to tension which stems from her challenge of the military's monopoly over policy towards Afghanistan and India. All indications are that the current government of Mian Nawaz Sharif is giving a stronger hand to the military to resume its leading role in both foreign and domestic affairs.

But despite the ascendent military, Pakistan's Afghan policy remains inconsistent. Refugees are seen as a domestic liability as well as an international

asset in determining the future of Afghanistan. The GOP has said that repatriation should be strictly voluntary -- a reference, in fact, to the government's concern that reductions in international assistance to the refugees might become a push factor or, conversely, that assistance cuts would make support for the refugees an intolerable burden on Pakistan. Thus, the belief that the refugees should eventually go home is tempered by the government's desire that they stay a while longer -- even at the risk of heightening tensions in the already volatile domestic politic.

Meanwhile, the Kabul government has no such ambivalence. It has made a serious effort to entice the refugees home. After replacing Babrak Karmal as head of the communist regime in Kabul in 1986, President Najibullah announced his "Policy of National Reconciliation," hoping to initiate a dialogue with the opposition and present a more acceptable face to the outside world.[13] Dismissed by many as a propaganda ploy to divide the resistance, this policy has offered amnesty to the regime's opponents and welcomed the return of all Afghans from abroad. Among other things, Najibullah has promised to allow returnees to travel freely back to their places of origin -- even to areas outside government control -- and decreed the restoration of confiscated property to its rightful owners. Returnees of military age are granted draft deferments of six months.

Physical Security: Land Mines and Aerial Bombardment

It is often said that the Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran are afraid to return to Afghanistan primarily because of continued warfare and because of the prevalence of land mines along travel routes and around their native villages. Certainly, the new refugee flows from urban centers under siege by the *mujahedin* since 1989 are evidence that intense fighting, rocket attacks and aerial bombardment make return to some areas unlikely. Since the spring 1991 fall of Khost, the Kabul regime has gone on the offensive in some areas, hitting hard at rebel strongholds that are staging areas for attacks on the government-held towns and highways. Other areas, notably some districts in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Badakhshan, have fallen to the *mujahedin* after fierce fighting.

However, most of the refugees in Pakistan are from remote rural areas in the eastern border region of the country which have been firmly held by the *mujahedin* since the Soviet withdrawal. Other than occasional bombardments of *mujahedin* bases and infiltration routes, these border districts have long been free

of any significant military engagements with Kabul government forces. Many, like Kunar province, are far from tranquil, however; they have become the fierce battlegrounds of rival political groups and local commanders who are vying for dominance.

The problem of land mines is serious, since both sides have used them widely and indiscriminately. Numerous civilian casualties and loss of livestock have resulted. Estimates of mines vary widely, from 3 to 30 to 50 million (indicating not only the dearth of accurate information on the subject, but also its intense politicization). The problem presented by the mines is worsened by the lack of maps and first-hand information about their location, especially near travel routes through mountainous areas, where they were scattered from aircraft. However, it also appears to be the case that most of the mines are in limited, generally definable areas. Contrary to some popular notions of wide swaths of land bristling with mines, experts believe that most were laid in strategic areas: along roads, around military outposts and in sectors of frequent guerrilla operation.

Refugees in Pakistan frequently mention the problem of mines, but they do not often rank it as a major concern when they weigh the risks of return. The most important routes of transportation across the border and inside the country are now used quite heavily. According to one observer, even during the Soviet occupation, as many as 400,000 people moved back and forth across the border each year. This movement comprised not only fleeing refugees and infiltrating *mujahedin*, but also civilian traders, nomads, and farmers commuting to tend their fields and to market crops.

Recently, in and near a mujahedin-held village on the outskirts of Baghlan town which had been completely destroyed during the war and then mined by Soviet and Kabul government forces, one hundred of the eight hundred original families who had returned to the area over a twelve-month period were rebuilding their homes. After several persons were killed by mines, local guerrillas "de-mined" the main village by grazing herds there (about sixty animals were killed). To avoid further losses and, perhaps, simply to get away from the site of so much tragedy, recent arrivals constructed homes at the foot of some nearby hills.

Civil Order and Local Political Stability

The absence of effective civilian authority in most localities which produced refugees may be of equally great concern for many Afghans who are weighing

whether to repatriate. *Mujahedin* or militia forces have varying degrees of control over most rural areas; many places are contested by more than one group. When there is fighting, it is likely between rival commanders -- many of whom could be accurately described as warlords, or, in some cases, as just plain brigands. There is fierce competition for control of local territory, population, resources and trade -- and for autonomy from outsiders.

Civilians who are living on their own in contested areas or who are moving from one district to another have minimal protection from banditry or harassment by rival groups. Often, protection is a factor of one's association with a commander or *mujahedin* group. In return, civilians are heavily taxed and subjected to requisitions of food, agricultural produce and property. Able-bodied males are conscripted for service with the militia or the mujahedin. In government-held areas, sons and husbands who are willing to serve in the army or government jobs receive this same kind of protection.

The authority of commanders, which is often based on access to weapons and men under arms, is enhanced by their ability to control local resources, including land and water rights, trade and communication routes. Typically, a leader's prestige and legitimacy is partly determined by his ability to provide protection, maintain order, and assure access to material goods.

Social disruption caused by a decade of warfare and the flight of many traditional leaders has led to what many observers refer to as a new ruling class of warriors, people who lack the legitimacy of traditional authority. This erosion of community leadership has also been exacerbated by the marginalization of tribal elders by the political party leaders who control the refugee settlements and relief distribution in Pakistan. These developments raise serious questions about whether the old leaders and those who followed them into exile are willing to come back home, and whether the new commanders are willing to permit their return.

So far, the extent of refugee return movements suggests that there are many places where people are finding it possible to return, despite the presence of mines and general insecurity. Often, those who repatriate find that kinship, tribal ties or political allegiance to strong commanders guarantees them an acceptable level of stability and protection. Thus, the returnee's relationship to the home community and those who control it is key when he determines whether local leaders consider his return as a benefit or a liability.

the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to assist. Although UNHCR signed individual memoranda of understanding with the Kabul, Tehran and Islamabad governments which outline modalities for the refugee repatriation, no formal comprehensive agreements among the three countries were signed.

But assumptions about a quick return and an end to displacement had to be revised as developments in Afghanistan dashed hopes for an early peace. Despite the Soviet withdrawal, Afghan resistance parties did not win the victory they expected, and they continued to fight. Never party to the Geneva Accords, which they opposed, most of the Afghan resistance based in Pakistan and Iran, as well as hundreds of guerrilla groups which control much of rural Afghanistan, have been adamant that a political settlement will be impossible as long as the Soviet-installed regime of President Najibullah remains in power.

The Kabul government, for its part, consolidated its hold over the cities and most of the important provincial capitals. The regime reached partial accommodations with former guerrilla groups in several districts surrounding its areas of control and along main transportation routes. In this way, Kabul was able to assure its survival and exercise at least nominal control over as much as one third of the country's population.

Continuing conflict and the political impasse stalled development of a mechanism for a formal repatriation program, and an effective international program of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction. Most of the resistance parties opposed refugee return, claiming that an Islamic government must first reign in Kabul. Despite Islamabad's affirmation of the right of voluntary repatriation, Pakistani military and intelligence services actively supported the Peshawar-based Afghan resistance in its bid for power -- and thus, shared its disapproval of repatriation schemes.

Conditions remain unstable and there is little economic attraction for refugees to return home. So far, only a small number have attempted to go back. Indeed, some development experts and long-time observers of Afghanistan contend that a massive, perhaps permanent, shift of population has occurred -- it being quite probable that fewer than half of the refugees in Pakistan, and even smaller numbers in Iran, will ever permanently repatriate, if peace is achieved.

Ironically, many more Afghans have gone home than is generally acknowledged. It is estimated that as many as 300,000 refugees from Pakistan and 100,000 from Iran have returned since mid-1988. In addition, more and more "commuters" regularly or seasonally move back and forth across borders for

In Afghanistan, politicians' public rhetoric often contrasts sharply with their actions, which tend to be defined more by a keen sense of *realpolitik*, than by ideology. In the case of many of the so-called spontaneous returns, it is a great irony that they appear to have had the tacit approval, if not the active encouragement, of refugee camp leaders, as well as leaders and commanders at home. Numerous repatriates confirm that they were able to move their families back home because their traditional leaders or the *mujahedin* commanders at home gave their consent or even directed their repatriation. It is not uncommon for commanders or their political party associates to issue letters of introduction which ask safe passage for bearers though *mujahedin*-held territory.

Although most early returnees have repatriated from camps in Baluchistan to southern Afghanistan, where traditional tribal leadership patterns are more or less intact, and where Peshawar-based resistance parties have a weaker political influence, many have also taken place from the NWFP, with the consent of party leaders and *mujahedin* commanders inside the country.

In two Baghlan province districts in Afghanistan which are controlled by strong commanders allied with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbii Islami, a powerful radical Islamic party which has taken a most strident position against refugee return (and is thought to be responsible for violence and harassment against returnees), commanders freely acknowledge that, with their active encouragement, returnees from Pakistan are increasingly showing up in their region. For repatriates, it seems, the deciding factor is the fact that they are either strong party supporters, or the family of commanders or their fighters. As in many other parts of Afghanistan, the commanders in these districts have seen it in their interest to consolidate and expand their political power bases and rebuild viable local economies by encouraging the resettlement of repatriates and internally displaced civilians.

Some seasoned observers say this pattern is especially prevalent in the northeastern provinces, where strong commanders from rival ethnic groups (the Pashtun and the Tajik) are involved in their own bitter contest for dominance and control of territory and population.

Land Tenure Issues

The matter of land tenure is a critical issue which affects returnees' physical security and economic survival. Following massive, wartime rural population

displacement, traditional social structures have been upset in most of the country. Landlords and small holders have fled as refugees, along with traditional tribal leaders and village elders. As suggested above, *mujahedin* commanders have, in effect, become a new class of landlords who are now the arbiters of local political power. Although some refugee landowners continue to collect rents and shares of produce from tenants working their properties, commanders have overtaken this role more and more. In Nimroz province districts, so-called "Maoist" guerrilla commanders have reportedly enacted their own land reform programs; either they have established farming collectives, or they re-distributed land to remaining tenant farmers.

In the north, the question of land use is colored by deep seated ethnic rivalries which have been inflamed by extended warfare. Historically the domain of the Tajiks, Uzbek and Turkoman, as well as smaller ethnic groups, this region was colonized by Pashtun tribal groups over the last one hundred years, beginning with the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman. Rahman wanted to disperse potential rivals and extend Pashtun control and influence north of the Hindu Kush. Pashtun landowners were among the first to flee that area during the communist land reforms of the late 1970s. In the northern provinces, some of the strongest *mujahedin* commanders leading the resistance to the Soviet invasion emerged from ethnic minority communities.

Villagers and a local official in a predominantly Uzbek district in Samangan province confirmed that most of the Pashtun land owners had fled, either to Pakistan or to Kabul. They said remaining Pashtuns "are poor, like us; we have no problems with them." They add that if the old landowners were to come back, "there would be trouble." Some local Uzbeks from a neighboring province who had been displaced by fighting said they would not be returning to their home area because it has been occupied and settled by Hazaras, the dominant group in that district.

Failure to resolve some of the land tenure issues will probably generate dangerous local conflicts and may even provoke additional internal displacements of returnees who cannot reclaim their lands. The situation of some Pashtun *kuchi* (nomads) groups suggests this potential problem. They had settled years ago in areas traditionally dominated by the Hazaras and the Uzbeks, in Jawzjan, Ghor and Faryab provinces (districts which have been incorporated into the recently designated province of Sar-i Pul), but fled en masse to Pakistan and Iran during the early years of the war.

Since then, a dozen tribal elders reported in the fall of 1990 that hundreds of families were trying to repatriate, but they had found their lands controlled by Uzbek militia commanders hostile to Pashtun returnees. Although the elders went to Kabul to petition the government for help in resolving the land dispute, it was unclear whether central authorities had either the wherewithal or the influence to do so, since the refugees' home region was under only marginal state control.

Asked about the potential for land disputes, refugee elders from Kunnar province said they had gladly "loaned" their lands to the *mujahedin* for the sake of the *jihad*. Although some of them indicated that they could visit their home villages occasionally and collect a share of the local produce, they did not think it was the right time to permanently repatriate. Others said they had forgone their shares of the harvest because the *mujahedin* needed the income more than they did. All expressed confidence that they will be able to return and resume rightful title to their property once an Islamic government rules Afghanistan. Other refugees, as well as Afghans inside Afghanistan, confided privately that land disputes are already a serious problem in many areas, and cite them as one of the reasons why many people have yet to return.

A powerful *mujahedin* commander who controls a district outside of Pul-i Khumri (a Pashtun associate of Hezb-i Islami's Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) described at length how his group, under the Islamic revolution, administered rich rice lands that owners abandoned when they fled for Pakistan or towns controlled by Kabul. Lands rightfully owned by "good Muslims" were being administered "by the *jihad*." They were being farmed by tenants who shared produce with the *mujahedin*. Absentee owners were welcome to come and collect their fair share of the harvest, but few in fact had done so -- perhaps, the commander said, because of the distance and the difficulties of the return journey. The lands of the Afghan government or its supporters had been confiscated by the *jihad*, and re-distributed to *mujahedin* and their families, many of whom had returned from Pakistan at the commander's invitation. Also in the area were a significant number of internally displaced families who had sought the protection of this commander. Many younger men were with the *mujahedin*; the older ones worked as casual field laborers.

According to the commander, Islam respects and defends the right of private property; once the *jihad* is won, property will be returned to owners who want to reclaim it and can produce valid titles. Any disputes will be resolved by an Islamic court of justice. The recent return of many commanders' followers and their families notwithstanding, he indicated that the time was still inappropriate for the return of most landowners. "They have a comfortable life back in

Pakistan," he said. "A war is still going on, and times are difficult here. Why would they want to come back now?"

Despite such assurances, more and more knowledgeable Afghans and foreign observers, inside Afghanistan and abroad, are very concerned about the probability of widespread water and land disputes and other forms of conflict (private, ethnic and political).

According to one European ethnologist with substantial experience in Afghanistan, whereas the communists had failed in their ill-conceived land reforms of the late 1970's, the *mujahedin* succeeded. Although land is not necessarily more equitably distributed now, the old social and economic order has been radically altered, with the strongest *mujahedin* commanders and their followers the new elite who control land and water resources in many areas. This fact must be contended with, regardless of the future shape of a central government in Kabul.

Socio-Economic Factors

Inside Afghanistan, the effects of the war, though disastrous to the whole country, are more evident in some areas than others. Damage is heaviest in the provinces closest to the Pakistan and Iranian borders, where *mujahedin* activity is greatest and there is strong popular support for the resistance. Massive destruction is also in areas adjacent to large urban areas (e.g. Kabul, Herat, Kandahar), and along key transportation routes, such as the Salang highway which runs from Kabul to the Soviet border.

Besides security questions, refugees' decisions to repatriate depend on their own demographics and a combination of factors related to economic and social conditions in Afghanistan. Refugees carefully weigh such factors against the relative security of a family's situation in their respective asylum country. Some of the most critical factors are:

- the ability of returnees to finance their return and sustain themselves on their own imported resources, or through local employment or trade during the initial period of re-establishing their homes and farms;

- access to farm inputs and markets;

- the availability of credit (a vitally important element that will determine the margin of acceptable risk for returning farmers and tradesmen); and

- the kinship ties or clan relationships and support networks that returnees retain with the local population, as well as with persons who remain in refugee camps.

U.N. and NGO workers indicate that many families have apparently been returning in stages, over the course of several seasons or years. Where returnees can gain access to their land, families often send their able-bodied males back on a seasonal basis. Also, they send them for longer periods to check out local conditions, work the land, or engage in trading. Known as "commuting," this phenomenon features individuals with employment or businesses in Pakistan who remain there for cash income; they not only support their relatives in the refugee camps, but they also help finance the rehabilitation of the home site and the eventual return of the extended family.

Commuting is especially evident in border areas like Kunar and Paktika, as well as in southern Afghanistan. Dependent family members remain in refugee camps, where they can continue to draw food rations and get medical and educational services. Commuting assures the refugees a "safety net" and minimizes risks to the family. In addition, practical preparations are made for the day when either permanent return becomes the most desirable option or continued asylum and access to assistance in Pakistan is impossible.

Many observers have been surprised by the extent of return to areas quite distant from the border, such as Kunduz province in the north and Helmand province in the southwest. It contrasts with the relatively little permanent return to nearby eastern provinces like Kunar. Probably those travelling the greatest distances have made firm decisions to stay once they have returned, given the high transportation costs and uncertain security conditions which are involved in coming back.

For refugees and internally displaced alike, a further influential factor with respect to return is the urbanization of an essentially peasant population, and the destabilization of the rural sector due to the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of farmers, traders and skilled craftsmen. In light of prospects for employment, cash income, and access to health and education services in Pakistan, many refugees have little incentive to return to the harsh life of remote mountain valleys back home. Those inclined to return to Afghanistan may eventually

migrate to the more secure towns and cities where there are the same attractions of employment and social services that they had in exile and which never existed in many areas of Afganistan, even in the best of times.

The economic push-pull factors which determine return cannot be categorized easily. For example, economic success in Pakistan can predispose Afghans towards either return or remaining in asylum. Some who have established businesses in Pakistan and Iran may decide to remain because it is in their financial interest to do so and they enjoy a relatively higher standard of living. To repatriate, they would need to be a significant reverse pull factor, such that the economic benefits of return far outweigh the relative security that they enjoy in Pakistan and Iran.

Others who have accumulated resources through steady employment or businesses in Pakistan and Iran may find return a viable and attractive prospect. They can draw on a greater pool of resources, and thus have more options for considering the financial risks of going back. They would also be able to make important contributions in reviving local economies.

It is believed that many such persons will hedge their bets, however. A considerable number of Afghans who have sufficient resources and a reliable network of personal contacts are already heavily engaged in cross-border business activity (transportation, trade, rent collection). Probably this group will continue to keep a foot on each side of the border for the time being.

For some families, the economic safety net includes relying on relatives who reside and work in Afghan cities like Kabul or Kandahar, and or in Europe and the United States. That kind of security is very likely to continue, even after the war ends and larger scale refugee return begins. Those who have the option of maintaining their safety net will do so and will keep it stretched as widely as possible.

By contrast, those living in relatively poor circumstances in first asylum countries might be inclined to consider early return. However, in addition to political constraints, they have few resources with which to travel and rebuild their lives. Transportation costs to northern and central Afghanistan are extremely high. The resources which are needed to rebuild a home, plant new crops and sustain a family until harvest time are beyond the reach of many, particularly those refugees with little supplemental income beyond their U.N. rations.

Refugees without employment or supplemental income tend to weigh the level of food assistance and social services available in countries of asylum relative to the aid package available for return. With the level of international assistance expected to decline dramatically in Pakistan in the next few years, more refugees will be compelled to consider their options for local settlement, versus their prospects for re-integration back home.

The danger in this regard is that one's economic resources in Pakistan may have little to do with the extent to which one can return in safety to Afghanistan. For example, a widow with several dependent children and no patron inside Afghanistan may find herself and her family in a conundrum: does she remain in Pakistan, unable to support her family financially or does she return to Afghanistan where neither her physical nor her economic security is assured?

Demographic Factors

Women and men may differ significantly in the way they assess whether to return. A survey of Afghan women in Baluchistan showed that almost all reported that meeting basic needs such as food and shelter would be the biggest problems they they expected to face back in Afghanistan. Problems would be most serious in the beginning, they thought. They also mentioned lack of money, the difficulties men would have getting jobs, and scarcities of health care facilities, water and land. "Before the war we had nothing in Afghanistan," one woman said. "Now it will be worse."[14]

A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) survey of trained Afghan women in Pakistan identified a number of repatriation priorities.[15] They included:

- Education -- About 70 percent of the women surveyed cited education as a top priority for Afghan reconstruction. They noted that reconstruction would not be effective if the populace were uneducated. The two most critical needs regarding education were teacher training and expansion of female education.

- Health Care -- The women supposed that health care, already poor before the Soviet invasion, had deteriorated as a result of ten years of war. They

noted that the rigors of return as well as landmine explosions and inter-group conflicts were likely to increase the need for health care. Further, they stated that the refugees had become accustomed to a higher level of care in Pakistan and, therefore, would return with heightened expectations. Educated women argued that it would be wise to take advantage of this situation so that people, especially women, become more accustomed to seeking health assistance when needed.

- The Future of Widows and Women with Handicapped Husbands -- The traditional social welfare system in Afghanistan had broken down, the women said. Traditionally, widows were absorbed into the husband's family, sometimes marrying a brother of the husband. In current Afghanistan, however, there would be too many widows for these traditional patterns to work. Many families consist only of women and children. Therefore, the widows will require special programs including a registration process to identify them as refugees; assistance to return to their homes, assistance in rebuilding home, and training programs to prepare them to earn money to support their families. Women with handicapped husbands will face many of the same problems, in that they will not be able to call upon their husbands for economic assistance to reintegrate.

- Orphans and Unaccompanied Minors -- The fighting during the past decade has left many children orphaned or separated from their families. Some may now be living with relatives, friends or other families. It is unknown whether their current living situations will continue after repatriation.

Women returnees have cited these issues as significant. They told a recent U.N. mission to Kunduz that they felt that it had been a mistake to leave Pakistan because of the lack of security and access to social services such as education and health facilities in Afghanistan, as well as their separation from the family they left behind.[16]

Demographic changes caused by fighting in Afghanistan will present returning women with major problems and issues. According to Nancy Hatch Dupree, a scholar of Afghan society,

"Possibly nearly a million men have been killed or disabled in the *jihad* although accurate figures are impossible to obtain. There are tens of thousands of widows with their children among the refugees; thousands of young girls have lost their intended mates; other thousands have suddenly become sole supporters of their households because their husbands are totally disabled."[17]

Having received international assistance while in refugee camps, the future of these women inside Afghanistan is not clear. Mrs. Dupree goes on to say that "tradition . . . dictates that these women be provided for as enjoined in the Quran (S.4:36). . . . No one has yet suggested any practical means for accomplishing this. Recent tentative discussions have only just begun to identify some of the social problems which will accompany the economic responsibilities of caring for so many unattached women with their numerous children."[18]

The UNICEF survey showed that serious obstacles impede women from being actively involved in the implementation of programs. The proportion of Afghan women who were trained before they arrived in Pakistan was minimal. More women have received training through refugee programs as health workers and traditional birth attendants. However, many had received only superficial instruction in basic mother/child health care. Only about five percent of the women whom the survey identified had received training which could be considered adequate by international standards. Most were teachers, with a smaller number trained as medical personnel.

The survey noted NGO interest in upgrading skill training programs for refugee women. However, it appeared that the NGOs were not adequately prepared to take on this role and would need help with program design. Survey authors recommended that the most skilled women be chosen to serve as trainers, networkers and supervisors in order to get their expertise disseminated throughout the community.[19]

Several obstacles had kept many from bringing their skills fully to bear. Many expressed concern about returning to Afghanistan, particularly if a fundamentalist government is installed. "Our most serious problem will be overcoming the narrow-mindedness of men who want to keep the women at home and who will use the Russian invasion as their justification," one woman noted.[20]

According to the survey, the trained women tended to come from only two areas inside Afghanistan -- Kabul and Kandahar. Most wanted to return to their former places of residence, although a few were willing to go wherever their skills

were needed. The latter wanted to organize educated women to supervise outreach programs to educate rural women. One of the side benefits of the refugee situation, it appeared, was having the chance to sensitize educated, urban Afghan women to the needs of the rural women. As one woman said: "I never realized how bad the situation for rural women was until I walked out through the countryside and then worked with women in the refugee villages. Now, it will be up to the educated women to do something for their rural sisters. Those of us who have medical training are particularly responsible to help them learn to take care of themselves and their children."[21]

At the urging of educated women associated with all of the political parties, a center was established in Peshawar to serve as an assembly point for women concerned about repatriation. In addition, the center provides skills training and literacy programs to prepare a larger cross-section of Afghan women to be productive on return.

The UNICEF study noted that programs should be established to sensitize male refugees to the need to involve women in repatriation and reconstruction: "During the inventory process, quite a few supportive men were encountered, including high level resistance party officials. These men have begun to realize that the support of women will be important because of the large number of men who have died, been seriously maimed, or will not return to Afghanistan. . . .Supportive men should be involved in developing and implementing these desensitization programs because, after all, most of them undoubtedly went through the process themselves."[22]

The survey results further pointed to the need to think through the requirements of repatriation, from the women's point of view, at the start, rather than at the end, of a refugee experience. The study included a number of recommendations for training programs which, had they been in operation for ten years, would have provided a good base of trained refugee women to help with repatriation and reconstruction.

For the millions of Afghan refugee children, return will present special problems. They, along with their displaced cousins, have no knowledge of peace. Their education and training has been severely limited. Only 125,000 Afghan children have been enrolled in formal primary school programs in Pakistan, only 12.5 percent of the school age children among the refugee population. Less than one-tenth of one percent of the Afghan girls of school age are in primary schools. By contrast, 47 percent of Pakistani school age children receive primary education.

trading or farming, as they maintain their dependent families in more secure Pakistan. Yearly, many migrant laborers and guest workers make extended visits to their families in Afghanistan, before they head back to Iran, where many have resided since before 1978. Most of those who have returned to Afghanistan have done so with little or no assistance from governments or international aid agencies such as the UNHCR.

These return migrations are not insignificant, even though they represent only a fraction of the exiled multitudes. They substantially exceed the recent, much-heralded voluntary repatriation of some 40,000 Namibians, 30,000 Nicaraguans and 12,500 Vietnamese to their respective homelands. Whether one works with lower or higher estimates, the quiet and continuing return of thousands of Afghans begs to be noticed.

Close study of such spontaneous, or self-determined repatriation will give humanitarian assistance planners key insights into life inside Afghanistan and the impact of the continuing conflict. Hopefully, they will also enable policymakers to better assess repatriation prospects and to develop effective programs.

This report seeks to determine the following: the extent to which refugee return has occurred; trends and patterns that have characterized their repatriation; and, the factors behind refugees' decisions either to repatriate or remain in exile. It will also examine the extent to which international humanitarian assistance programs have fostered the safe and effective repatriation of Afghan refugees who have been residing in Pakistan and Iran.

Just as Afghan women will need skills to help them adjust upon return, so too, will their children.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: ITS ROLE IN PROMOTING RETURN

Aware of the very real impediments to an easy political settlement in Afghanistan, the U.N. has experimented with various forms of humanitarian intervention to foster peace and enhance repatriation prospects. Thus, former U.N. Special Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, promoted the concept of "humanitarian encirclement."[23] Under this scheme, U.N. agencies were to work with all parties to the conflict -- and their patrons --to mobilize resources to reach the neediest areas throughout the country. To that end, assistance programs, called Operation Salam, have been mounted from three countries bordering Afghanistan: Pakistan, Iran and the Soviet Union. Cross-conflict U.N. humanitarian missions have also been conducted between Kabul and other government held cities and resistance areas. Humanitarian encirclement assumed that warriors could be overwhelmed with civilian and humanitarian concerns. Because the effective delivery of aid to the neediest areas requires cooperation from all parties, including opponents, it was hoped that momentum for reconstruction and constructive use of belligerents' energies would result.

At first, the U.N. coordinated humanitarian aid through one office and brokered political negotiations through another. In part, the aim was to try to ensure that aid was not entangled with politics and would, therefore, be administered even-handedly and in timely fashion. But this whole attempt to depoliticize humanitarian assistance bucked a strong tide of international involvement in the Afghan conflict. Throughout the Soviet occupation, such assistance was never available in a strictly neutral, humanitarian context; instead, it was closely associated with the strategic and political interests of donors, or it was made subservient to them.

Many Western donors who had long supported the refugees and the *mujahedin* cause tied their willingness to provide funds for Operation Salam to massive refugee repatriation, and, like the United States, continued to fund large-scale bilateral aid programs for bolstering the resistance and its influence inside Afghanistan.

At the same time, military aid and armaments poured into the country from the United States, the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia and other patrons of the conflict, and simply dwarfed the meager resources which have been given to the U.N. for humanitarian programs since the 1988 humanitarian appeal for funds to

launch Operation Salam. During a humanitarian mission to Paktika province in 1990, a U.N. project director observed a convoy of large new trucks carrying American weaponry to the *mujahedin* in the interior. With wonder, he remarked that he had just seen war material pass by that was worth more than his entire yearly budget for training medical workers and building clinics in eastern Afghanistan.

Consequently, humanitarian encirclement had neither substantial success in promoting peace in Afghanistan, nor did it have much more success in enhancing repatriation prospects. As noted earlier, return was influenced by the same political factors that prevented peace, as well as by economic and social realities that stemmed from extended warfare. Increasingly, knowledgeable observers believe that much of the Afghan refugee population, perhaps as much as half, may remain permanently in asylum even if peace comes. To the extent conditions remain unstable, there is little economically to attract refugees back to Afghanistan. Yet, repatriation and reconstruction programs continue to be predicated on the visible return of substantial numbers.

As the war dragged on, humanitarian assistance seemed to have virtually no impact generating momentum for peace, or fostering repatriation. Major donors, like Japan, withheld funding for reconstruction pending clearer evidence of significant refugee return, and arguing that, amid the continuing conflict, its money would be wasted. Operating with insufficient funds, and faced with rapidly diminishing resources, the U.N. focused its efforts on several relatively small projects for promoting repatriation, hoping that return would generate peace and renew donor interest in reconstruction.

These efforts fell into two major categories: assistance to "zones of tranquility" which could serve as magnets for return, and implementation of a pilot repatriation program that would provide financial help to refugees who decided on their own to go home. The first was part of a larger strategy, not only to try to enhance conditions conducive to refugee return, but also to promote peace through humanitarian activities in peaceful areas of the country. The second program was a more narrowly focused effort to provide assistance to Afghans and their families who were deciding to repatriate, despite the hardships involved and the war.

Zones of Tranquility

Former UNOCA Special Coordinator Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan coined the term "zones of tranquility" when he referred to the areas of Afghanistan where fighting had largely subsided, and where (assumably) refugees would willingly return if there was adequate assistance. Through negotiations with the various parties and commanders who control these areas, assistance has been conditioned on a "humanitarian consensus" for the safe passage and use of the aid. Prince Saddruddin urged that priority assistance be targeted where the parties to the conflict would guarantee U.N. agencies and their NGO partners security and unhindered operational access to areas under control.

With the end of large-scale fighting and the threat of heavy aerial bombardment the past two years, there has been significant potential for cross-border relief and development assistance. Such aid has been most widespread in eastern Afghanistan, where many of the refugees in Pakistan are from. It is clear that, in some parts, there has been a dramatic upsurge in agriculture, with many repairs being made to irrigation works, and substantial replanting of grain crops, orchards and vineyards. Gradually, conditions are improving in some localities, with work being done by local residents and refugee commuters; in these areas, the capacity for absorbing many returnees is greater than before.

Most of the cross-border assistance has been furnished either by the U.N., or directly by donor governments, with NGOs as the primary providers.[24]

Over the past four or five years, a wide variety of organizations has joined together to provide assistance directly inside Afghanistan. UNHCR has actively supported cross-border assistance programs for rehabilitating areas where refugees are likely to return. The Kabul office of the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) has demonstrated flexibility for work throughout the country, both across Afghan government and *mujahedin* lines, and from Pakistan. Bilateral organizations, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have supported cross-border food-for-work programs.

Aimed at creating conditions conducive to return, these efforts have run into financial, logistical, political and security problems, however. The U.N. has not had the financial resources to carry out all of the projects which have been cited by needs assessment missions as prerequisites for return. Important programs have not been completed or carried through, or they have been

ineffective because they have been insufficiently funded. This has cost the U.N. credibility as frustrations have grown in the wake of its failure to deliver promised assistance.

Most seriously, continuing widespread conflict hampered efforts to implement assistance projects. Furthermore, it has been difficult to ensure that cross-border aid actually arrives in the right places, and is used for reconstruction. For proper monitoring of cross-border assistance, a regular U.N. presence is needed on both sides of the international border and lines of control inside Afghanistan, but that feat has not yet been accomplished in most areas.

In principle, the purveyors of cross-border assistance strove to deal even-handedly with all parties. NGOs have been more flexibile than the U.N., which has been constrained by Pakistani and Afghan official channels. But, like all facets of assistance, the aid which has arrived in zones of tranquility has not been entirely neutral. Development brings authority to those who control it; thus, the various parties often sought the cross-border aid to buttress their own positions, while they remained opposed to the refugee return it was meant to encourage.

According to many NGOs and donor countries, and in the perception of the recipients, for some years before the inauguration of Operation Salam, cross-border assistance was very much part and parcel of aiding the *mujahedin* cause. Given that, Afghans on both sides of the border have always viewed outside assistance as an inherently political matter.

Identifying and maintaining zones of tranquility has been difficult, hindering plans to promote return to them. Cross-border assistance has been most effective in areas which have a certain level of stability and viability. The more secure localities usually owe their stability to the success government authorities or local *mujahedin* commanders have had establishing uncontested control of the area, or to the development of a modus vivendi among neighboring rivals.

Even though there may have been relatively little fighting between government troops and the *mujahedin* for a long time, there is increasing political fragmentation, intense feuding between rival groups, and general lawlessness throughout Afghanistan. Thus, it is virtually impossible to declare any region a tranquil zone. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), no areas are truly stable or suitable for permanent repatriation, and the international community is ill-advised to try to promote massive return prior to a peace settlement. In the struggle for local political control, fighting can shift in any direction rapidly.

Not infrequently, humanitarian assistance has perpetuated conflict, not repatriation or peace. All too often, humanitarian programs have benefited those families and villages which are most closely affiliated with the strongest commanders. In the most extreme cases, aid has become an important source of revenue for some local commanders, largesse by which they sustain their followers and enhance their power bases. Seemingly neutral endeavors -- building a clinic, repairing a bridge, assisting returning families -- acquire highly political casts.

Often, rivals perceive assistance as favoring an adversary. They retaliate by trying to destroy or impede a project, or forcing their own cut from a program. Regularly, they block roads and hijack vehicles and aid material. Increasingly, there have been abductions of Afghan and expatriate aid workers; tragically, in some cases, there have even been deaths.

It is hard to tell whether the concepts of humanitarian encirclement of zones of tranquility would have led to greater repatriation and peace prospects if they had been fully funded from the start. When faced with relatively modest repatriation results, donors have withheld their funding commitments, arguing that they would provide support when large numbers of refugees finally returned. This has left U.N. programs for Afghan reconstruction severely underfunded, despite the agency's argument that it needs funds in any case in order to prepare for any eventuality.

In short, the unwillingness of protagonists to resolve the conflict in Afghanistan stalled U.N. efforts to foster peace through humanitarian intervention. External patrons of Afghan belligerents are to blame as well, since they have long fueled the warfare and have failed to support the U.N.'s political initiatives to broker a settlement. Invariably, these are many of the same donors who have been reluctant to commit scarce funds to the international humanitarian endeavor.

Although the term "zones of tranquility" has come to be seen as meaningless and has largely been abandoned, the concept remains, in the sense that U.N. activities occur only in areas where security is assured, and where there is a consensus among local commanders and elders with respect to project implementation. More recently, UNHCR has promoted efforts among U.N. agencies and NGOs to identify localities where there is evidence of substantial refugee return, and to target them for priority assistance. The aim is to focus on areas which the refugees themselves have found suitable for return, because their repatriation is probably the most reliable indicator that local conditions are conducive to reconstruction.

Pilot Repatriation Project

In July 1990, the UNHCR embarked on a pilot refugee repatriation project.[25] Without actually promoting return, the project aimed to give some official international recognition to the fact that many refugees themselves were initiating repatriation. This was thought to be more effective than trying to organize large-scale voluntary repatriation movements from refugee camps. In addition, UNHCR hoped that the exercise would yield some hard data about the actual level of refugee return, and that the refugee assistance rolls in Pakistan could be reduced accordingly.

With the agreement of the Pakistani government, the UNHCR and the WFP jointly established a series of encashment points inside Pakistan, along the main transit routes into Afghanistan. There, homeward-bound refugees would receive assistance packages of cash and food (the local currency equivalent of U.S. $150, and three 100 kilogram sacks of wheat per family) in return for the surrender of valid ration passbooks. U.N. agencies considered this assistance a contribution to help defray returnees' travel and relocation expenses. For their part, the Pakistani authorities agreed to set up joint monitoring teams with the UNHCR which would patrol and monitor the main travel routes to the border. Their aim was to create safe transit corridors where returnees would not be harassed or hindered on their journeys between the camps, encashment points and the border. UNHCR planners hoped that the program would form the basis of a continuous U.N. effort to foster repatriation from Pakistan.

As of mid-1991, some 18,000 families (estimated to be as many as 90,000 people) had received assistance through this pilot project.[26] This figure was far below the initial UNHCR projection that as many as 250,000 people might avail themselves of the program in 1990 alone. Although planned to run only through mid-October 1990, the pilot project has been extended for an indefinite period. Most aid workers who are familiar with it say that although 90,000 refugees may have benefited from the encashment scheme, it is extremely difficult to draw a direct correlation between the surrender of ration passbooks and actual repatriation.

The problem of access and the limited U.N. presence in rural Afghanistan make it impossible to verify the return of those refugees whom the program de-registered. Shortages of manpower for security monitoring has been a major program shortcoming. UNHCR could not reach directly across the border into the areas where refugees were returning, although a number of repatriates were

"monitored" through interviews at the Peace Guest Houses. However, the absence of thorough monitoring -- and the protection that a monitoring system implies -- contributed to the limited success of the pilot repatriation program. Its efficacy, as well as the appropriateness of UNHCR participating in a repatriation program without having sufficient capacity to monitor, have been questioned by many conscientious U.N. field staff.

The extremely hostile reaction of most Afghan resistance leaders was even more basic to the limited success of the program. Indications are that their sentiments are shared by the ISI and the Pakistani military, which have a strong voice in determining Islamabad's Afghan policy. These negative attitudes made the corridors of safe transit ineffective. In the heavily politicized atmosphere of the refugee camps, the public denunciation of early repatriation needed only to be reinforced by relatively few, yet highly visible incidents in order to discourage wide, enthusiastic response to the U.N. program.

From the start of the pilot repatriation project, there have been documented incidents of threats, harassment, banditry and violence perpetrated against returning civilians. Roadblocks, extortion, abduction, destruction of property, and shootings have caused several deaths. While many of the most serious problems occurred inside Afghanistan, there are reliable reports of incidents in Pakistan itself which involved Pakistani Frontier Scouts and ISI agents, as well as armed *mujahedin* and highway robbers.

Some critics have suggested that the program may have forced the hand of repatriation opponents by creating a situation in which failure to suppress it would have seriously eroded the authority of the resistance leaders. While spontaneous return movements did continue throughout the year, they happened at a much diminished pace and with a lower profile. Questioned by U.N. field monitors, returnees on the road or in the Kabul government Peace Guest Houses usually responded that they were unregistered refugees who had not been able to avail themselves of the pilot program, possibly out of fear of reprisals or banditry. Also, the respondents may have worried that they would be disqualified from receiving U.N. aid on the other side of the border if it were known that they had already received assistance packages in Pakistan.

U.N. staff monitors of the pilot project suggest that the exercise may have revealed more about the underground economy of the camps than it did about refugee return. Since the amount of cash and food assistance offered was the same, regardless of family size, it quickly became apparent that passbooks listing fewer people had a higher encashment value, and were less valuable in terms of

the quantity of rations the holder could continue to draw, if retained. Furthermore, as often as not, it is the group leaders, rather than individual heads of family, that hold the passbooks and are responsible for collecting and distributing rations. Some hold as many as several hundred passbooks. The fact that a substantial number of the surrendered passbooks may have been surplus documents suggests an effort on the part of their holders to simply cash in their rations -- rather than clear evidence of families being interested in repatriation. Through camp inquiries, aid workers learned that the black market value of ration passbooks had soared to a rate higher than the value of the U.N. encashment package.

In spite of these difficulties, proponents of the UNHCR program still claim that it achieved a certain degree of success:

- the program facilitated the deregistration of a certain number of people -- thereby freeing the resources it would have taken to maintain some 14,000 families for other programs like cross-border relief and development assistance;

- it served as a tangible way to document refugee return for donor countries which have linked their willingness to sustain aid contributions for humanitarian programs in Afghanistan to visible evidence of repatriation; and

- it had the positive effect of making the discussion of repatriation acceptable among refugees in the camps. In prompting widespread public debate within the refugee communities, the program may have allowed some individuals and leaders to consider return seriously and for the first time.

CONCLUSION

Within the last two years, Washington and Moscow have ended the Cold War, and proclaimed their mutual interest in resolving regional conflicts around the globe that have long been superpower struggles. With the support of these former adversaries, the world community has affirmed a leading role for a reinvigorated U.N. in mediating peace talks and brokering difficult transitions from battlefields to elections, as well as in fostering the reconstruction and the end of uprootedness for millions.

Until recently, Afghanistan seemed to have eluded this reconciliation as it frustrated the major protagonists' attempts to disengage from the conflict they had fueled for so long. In May 1991, U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar announced a five-point peace plan that called for an internationally supported intra-Afghan dialogue aimed at ending hostilities, the formation of a broad-based interim government and internationally monitored elections. This announcement was followed last September by a U.S.-Soviet agreement for a mutual cut-off of arms shipments to Afghanistan, effective January 1, 1992.

More recently, promising signs of progress in the peace negotiations have been seen amid changes in the military situation as new coalitions among former enemies developed. The U.N. special envoy negotiating the settlement, Benon Sevan, announced in early April 1992 that a resolution to the conflict was near. Although some hard-line rebel groups were still in disagreement with the peace plan, most parties to the conflict appeared to have accepted the components of an agreement. As of mid-April, Najibullah had stepped down from leadership of the Kabul government and discussions had begun as to the composition of a new regime. The dangers of ethnic conflict and potential fragmentation remain, but the potential for an "Afghan solution" increased substantially.

A resolution to the conflict cannot come soon enough for the millions of Afghans who remain in limbo in Pakistan and Iran. Western donors, tired of what appeared to be endless civil war, have already announced likely redirections in humanitarian assistance. There has been movement in this direction for several years. In March 1990, UNOCA Special Coordinator Sadruddin Aga Khan, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Thorvald Stoltenberg, and WFP Director James Ingram undertook a fact-finding mission to Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, to assess the status of humanitarian assistance programs. They stressed the urgency

A NATION UPROOTED: THE LEGACY OF CONFLICT

The factors behind Afghan exile and displacement are inter-related and have affected individuals in varying degree. Viewed in the aggregate, however, they have caused and prolonged the uprootedness of millions of civilians.

The massive flight and displacement of Afghan civilians over the past thirteen years has occurred within a context of relatively fluid regional population movements. Afghanistan's borders with Pakistan and Iran are long and porous; there is considerable cross-border movement by peoples who share common languages, cultures and religious faith. Ethnic and kinship ties are especially strong among the Pashtun tribes, whose traditional territory straddles the rugged mountain ranges which today form the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While some estimates put the pre-war population of Afghans living in Pakistan at around 500,000, it is hard to know for sure, since many Pashtuns in the tribal areas along the border enjoyed dual nationality. During the mid-1970's, the repression imposed by Duad Khan's nationalist regime prompted a number of the Islamic resistance leaders to flee to Pakistan, along with several thousand followers. The earliest substan-
tial refugee displacements took place over the twenty months between the communist coup d'etat in April 1978 (in which Daud was assassinated) and the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Widespread rural uprisings stemmed from the repressive policies of Nur Mohammad Taraki (April 1978 - September 1979) and Hafizullah Amin (September - December 1979). Refugees and displaced civilians increased dramatically amidst intense fighting soon after the Soviets intervened and replaced Amin with Babrak Karmal in December 1979.[3]

The general patterns of population displacement -- external flight or internal displacement -- have varied region to region, year to year. The most frequently cited cause has been the war itself: aerial bombardment and ground fighting between the *mujahedin* (guerrilla forces of the Afghan resistance) and Soviet troops and Kabul's soldiers. Others have included military conscription and taxation of the populace by warring sides, ethnic tensions, land disputes, general economic disruption, crop failures and food shortages. Many people left their villages at the urging of local religious leaders and the Pakistan-based political parties, which called on civilians to undertake *hijirat* (the flight of the "faithful" from a land under the domination of the "godless"). In the Afghan context, *hijirat*

of resolving the decade-old regional refugee crisis over the next two to three years, indicating that needed international assistance would be difficult to sustain beyond then. Sadaka Ogata, who succeeded Stoltenberg, has since urged the same. The world community's impatience with the deadlocked conflict has been apparent and it has also underscored the dilemma U.N. agencies and donor countries face as they try to stretch limited resources to respond to myriad humanitarian crises worldwide.[27]

While recognizing the pitfalls in the current use of humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan, the international community must find pragmatic approaches that will give the Afghan people options for resuming normal lives, even as efforts to obtain peace are intensified. And, most important, humanitarian assistance must be designed to support longer-term peace. To that end:

- Though there is a serious potential for self-aggrandizing abuse of aid, nevertheless, international assistance should be available with an emphasis on addressing the emergency humanitarian needs of Afghan civilians on all sides of the border, across all lines. To the extent possible, aid should be provided directly to the civilian population.

- Those now seeking repatriation should be assisted materially and politically by the international community throughout their return. This means providing assistance and protection not only in the asylum countries but also during their border crossings, returns to their villages, and personal reestablishment. UNHCR must be supported in this regard, but it should also be urged to take a more pro-active stance on behalf of the refugees with the countries of asylum and of origin.

- It must be recognized that many of the Afghans now in Pakistan and Iran will stay there <u>even if peace comes</u>. A declaration of an official policy of permanent local integration might be politically unacceptable to Islamabad and Tehran, but efforts can be made to increase the economic self-sufficiency of the refugees. Breaking the dependency syndrome will help those who remain, and perhaps it will also help pave the way for people to be able to make their own decisions to return.

- If international assistance to asylum countries is reduced, as appears likely, it is important that the remaining assistance programs target the most vulnerable populations. Their needs must be addressed and they must be able to benefit from opportunities for return or local integration. This may mean special programs for Afghan women, ensuring their protection from elements in the *mujahedin* who oppose efforts on their behalf.

- Multilateral approaches to humanitarian assistance should be supported, preferably via U.N. programs; politically motivated bilateral assistance should be limited, if not curtailed altogether. There is need for better cooperation, as well as more effective joint coordination and assistance planning between U.N. agencies and NGOs. In all cases, they should strive to ensure that aid programs are implemented impartially and even-handedly. To disburse aid any other way risks deepening and exacerbating the political rivalries and fragmentation inside Afghanistan.

- It is crucial that NGOs play an integral role in U.N. programs (as partners, rather than independent players). Afghans need to be much more involved, preferably under the umbrella of U.N. agencies and participating international NGOs.

Planning for larger scale refugee return, reintegration and reconstruction should continue while these activities are underway. While the timing of massive repatriation has been miscalculated, the notion that such a return could have destabilizing effects, if unplanned, remains correct.

In many parts of the world, conflicts that once seemed intractable are ending. As has been demonstrated in Cambodia, the final push towards a peace agreement can occur very quickly. The Afghan refugee population is so large that even if only one-third of them return after a peace settlement, they will overwhelm resources and the absorption capacity of any new government in Kabul. It would be unfortunate if the international community looked back one day on the present and saw it as a lost opportunity to prepare the repatriation that could have supported peace and reconstruction.

ENDNOTES

1. See U.N. document SG/CONF. 3/1, 10 June 1988: *Appeal of the Secretary General to the Conference on United Nations Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programmes Relating to Afghanistan;* New York, 14 June 1988.

2. See U.S. Department of State (1988) Publication *Selected Documents No. 26: Agreements on Afghanistan,* for the text of the Geneva Accords, including the *Bilateral Agreement between the Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan on the Voluntary Return of Refugees.*

3. For more detailed treatment of the history of the flight of Afghan refugees during the past decade see: P. Centlivres and M. Centlivres-Demont (1988: *Current Sociology* 36/2, London, and 1988: *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol. 1, No. 2); and M. Sliwinski (1989: *Orbis*, and 1989: *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 4).

4. Government of Pakistan, Central Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees figures (1989), cited in UNHCR document (1990): *Report on Afghan Refugee Origins*, Overview Table O-2.

5. By definition, the number of unregistered refugees living in Pakistan is impossible to establish, and difficult to estimate. Based on interviews with relief workers and Pakistani officials, as well as on-site interviews with unregistered refugees in Peshawar and Quetta, 500,000 appears to be a reasonable general estimate -- although some observers suggest the numbers may be much higher. It its 1990 national census, the Government of Pakistan elected not to enumerate Afghans living in Pakistan's major urban areas -- reflecting (in the view of some western observers) an official reluctance to draw public attention to the fact that large numbers of unregistered Afghans have integrated themselves into Pakistani society.

6. Unpublished confidential UNHCR report. RPG researcher Michael Knowles was present in Baluchistan at the time of the exercise, and accompanied UNHCR field staff during their surveys of several refugee settlements in Pishin District.

7. See Harrison 1990 (pp.47-48).

8. Interview with Dr. Marek Sliwinski in Geneva, 12 November 1990.

9. Much of the discussion contained in this and other sections of the paper, concerning the situation of Afghan refugees in Iran, is based on information provided RPG in interviews with UNHCR officials, Afghanistan scholars, and the Iranian embassy in Kabul. See also: UNHCR 1990: op. cit., and UNHCR *Fact Sheet: Islamic Republic of Iran* (April 1989 - Vol. 3, No. 1).

10. The discussion of the situation of Afghanistan's internally displaced, in this and other sections of the paper, is drawn from a 1991 report prepared by RPG for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian and Economic Assistance relating to Afghanistan (UNOCA).

11. The discussion on factors influencing Afghan refugee return, in this and other sections of the paper is based on extensive interviews conducted with refugees in Pakistan, returnees in Afghanistan, government officials, representatives of international agencies, and non-governmental organizations.

12. See Gossman, 1990: *Afghanistan: the Forgotten War* (An Asia Watch Report)

13. The Kabul regime's welcome of returnees from Pakistan and Iran, as an integral part of the Policy of National Reconciliation, was a prominent theme voiced by the government ministry officials, municipality officers and provincial authorities interviewed by RPG in Kabul and northern Afghanistan during October and November of 1990, and June and July of 1991.

14. Gunillo Wingo, "Female Attitudes and Social Well-Being: Preparing Repatriation, A Pilot Study in Two Afghan Refugee Villages in Baluchistan," Quetta: UNHCR and Radd Barnen/Swedish Save the Children, 1990, p. 22.

15. Kerry M. Connor, "Skill Inventory of Afghan Women Refugees in the North West Frontier and Baluchistan Provinces," Islamabad: UNICEF, 1988.

16. "Kundoz Mission, 28 March - 7 April 1991" included representatives of UNHCR, UNOCA and Oxfam/Islamabad.

17. Nancy Hatch Dupree, "The Role of Afghan Women After Repatriation," n.d., p.23-24.

18. Ibid.

19. Connor, "Skills Inventory of Afghan Women," p.5.

20. *Ibid*, p. 31.

21. *Ibid*, p.26.

22. Connor, "Skill Inventory of Afghan Women," p.39-40.

23. See Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, in his forward to *Operation Salam Third Consolidated Report* (October 1990), United Nations Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Relating to Afghanistan, Geneva.

24. For a useful overview of NGO cross-border assistance activities, see: *An Overview of NGO Assistance to the People of Afghanistan*, by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), Peshawar, March 1990.

25. See UNHCR document: *Note on Voluntary Repatriation to Afghanistan (Pilot Project -- July 15 to October 15, 1990)*; Interagency Report: UNHCR, UNOCA, WFP, Geneva.

26. Statistics provided by UNHCR/Islamabad.

27. UNHCR document: *Visit of the High Commissioner to Afghanistan and Pakistan (25-29 March 1990): Summary of Conclusions.*

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is seen by Islamic resistance leaders as the civilian counterpart to the *jihad* (Muslim holy war against non-believers, in this case the communist regime and its supporters). From a secular standpoint, this has reflected a deliberate strategy of the *mujahedin* -- to deny the Kabul regime control of the civilian population in the countryside, and to create bases of support in Pakistan.

Throughout the country, civilians were forced to flee as well by Kabul and Soviet forces' attempts to depopulate strategic areas near major highways and communications routes. Many of these areas are still security zones, a fact which prevents the return of many displaced persons.

Political and ethnic conflicts resulting in human rights abuses also account for much of the flight. Often, individuals or groups aligned with one faction or another have been the victims of violence, torture, coercion, or imprisonment without trial at the hands of rival forces. Some civilians say they fled because of their reluctance to actively support any party, and their weariness with constant harassment and suspicion from contesting forces. The patterns of Afghan refugee flight have varied even within the same district or village in Afghanistan, with some families going to Pakistan or Iran, and others relocating in safe neighboring villages or mountain valleys. Some have moved to government-controlled cities like Kabul, Jalalabad, and Mazar-i-Sharif, while still others have stayed in their home areas.

While the largest numbers of Afghans fled their home villages soon after the Soviet invasion in the early 1980s, displacement has continued nonetheless. For example, in 1989-91, fighting between *mujahedin* and government forces near major cities such as Jalalabad, Kabul and Khost, as well as severe economic hardship in much of the country, caused an additional 100,000 refugees to flee to Pakistan. During that period, too, drought and insect infestations caused crop failures and severe food shortages in several northwestern provinces, a fact which forced tens of thousands of people to migrate to other areas inside Afghanistan, or to head to Iran and Pakistan, where they sought assistance and work.

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Refugees in Pakistan

Although Pakistan is not a signatory to the July, 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, or to the January, 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, it has generously hosted Afghan refugees on the humanitarian grounds that they have fled war and political repression. Pakistanis also note that Islamic duty requires them to offer safe haven to fellow Muslims. In comparison with many asylum countries, Pakistan has been very liberal. Afghan refugees have unhindered freedom of movement within Pakistan, where they can work, conduct business and attend school.

It is impossible to understand the Pakistan government's position apart from its point of view on the Afghan civil war. For Islamabad, assistance to the refugees has never been considered a purely humanitarian activity; rather, it has been an integral part of supporting the *mujahedin* and the Islamic political parties in their fight against the communist government in Kabul and its Soviet supporters.

According to the government of Pakistan, there are 3.2 million persons officially registered as refugees: 2.2 million are in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), 800,000 in Baluchistan, and 200,000 in the Punjab.[4] The majority reside in some 336 camps which are administered by the government's Refugee Commissionerate and the Afghan resistance. In addition, there may be as many as 500,000 unregistered refugees in the suburbs and inner city areas of Peshawar, Quetta, Karachi and Islamabad/Rawalpindi, or encamped in settlements near the border.[5]

While the NWFP figures are more or less accepted by many international relief organizations, the official numbers in Baluchistan are believed to be exaggerated. An October 1991 UNHCR informal field survey suggests that the actual number of refugees in Baluchistan province is much lower than the official figure of 800,000.[6] In many of the long-established refugee settlements in Pishin district (e.g. Mohammed Khel and Surkhab) a physical count of housing compounds indicates that only one third to one half of the officially registered refugee families are actually present. About one fifth of the compounds (a much higher percentage in some settlements, like Panj Pai) have been abandoned, with neighbors reporting that the occupants returned to Afghanistan or to Quetta.

Similar surveys from previous years have shown a substantial gap between official figures and reality. While the discrepancies may be explainable, they also

raise serious questions. If counts are, in fact, much lower, where are the refugees represented by the difference in figures? Either they never existed, in which case one might contest the level of relief assistance over the last decade -- or significant numbers of people have moved elsewhere. Given such uncertainty, it is difficult to know for sure how many people have stayed in asylum, and how many have repatriated.

At the height of the war, such controversial questions were squelched by major donors like the United States, which did not want to risk an embarrassing confrontation with Pakistan, the host country, according to one seasoned field monitor. Fully supporting the Afghan resistance was a U.S. priority, and Washington was willing to go along if part of doing that involved some diversion of humanitarian aid for military (or commercial) purposes. Refugee relief, like military assistance to the *mujahedin*, was administered solely by the host country authorities.

An overwhelming majority of the Afghans in Pakistan (about 85%) are ethnic Pashtuns. Most of the refugees residing in the North West Frontier Province are from the Pashtun tribal belt in the eastern provinces or from the north. The majority of the refugees in Baluchistan province are Pashtuns from the southern provinces of Kandahar, Zabul, and Helmand. Of the 20 million Pashtuns who make up the total, an estimated 11 million are citizens of Pakistan. Almost 3 million of the 9 million Pashtuns who are Afghan nationals have sought refuge in Pakistan or Iran during the last decade.[7] In addition, there are smaller numbers of Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkoman and other minority groups from the northern provinces in both the North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Wherever possible, refugees as well as internally displaced persons seek safety among their own relatives or tribal kinsmen.

The vast majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are also women and children. While some of the women are widows who lost their husbands to the Afghan war, others are temporarily without their male relatives. Most working age men move in and out of the refugee settlements -- either to fight, trade or farm in Afghanistan, or to work in Pakistan's towns and cities.

Although the settlements provide relative security for the dependent families of the *mujahedin*, the refugee experience has brought a major change for most Afghan women. In exile, they have had to contend with a stricter form of seclusion, or *purdah*. They are expected to remain in their compounds, avoiding contact with persons outside of their immediate families -- strange men, in particular. This was not the case in Afghanistan, where much of the rural population had lived in relative isolation and among their close kinsmen; women were able to move more freely within their own villages. Often, they even worked with their men in the fields.

Swiss scholar Marek Sliwinski estimates that as many as 30% of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan were either born there, or were small children when they arrived. [8] With the current high birth rate, that percentage is growing rapidly. Thus, tragically, a generation of young Afghans has grown up in refugee camps, with little schooling and few opportunities to learn either traditional agricultural skills, or the kinds of skills needed for something more than the menial jobs which are available in the bustling cities of Pakistan. Most youngsters have no memory of community life in rural Afghanistan.

It is important to note that, contrary to the notion of a mass of poor, hapless civilians living on the world's charity, the Afghan refugee settlements in Pakistan have always been integral to a complex network, closely linked with external support for the war inside Afghanistan. All Afghan settlements -- both registered and unregistered -- have offered sanctuary to *mujahedin* fighters during the cold winter months, and year round shelter and sustenance for their refugee dependents. They have also served as recruiting grounds for new fighters. A vital extension of the camp network is the majority of working age males who are away from the camps -- on *jihad* with the *mujahedin*, trading or farming the family lands back home, or working on the local economy in Pakistan or Iran.

Afghans have come to play a dominant role in Pakistan's commercial road transportation sector -- owning and operating many of the trucks and buses which run between the port city of Karachi and Quetta and Peshawar, the gateways for cross-border trade with Afghanistan. Also, many refugees are employed as agricultural or construction laborers, sharecroppers, shopkeepers, merchants and craftsmen. Because Afghans are willing to work at lower wages than Pakistanis, they provide much casual labor, not only in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province, but in many major cities.

In general, the Afghan refugees and the Pakistanis have co-existed remarkably well. Pakistan, for its part, has benefited from the pool of casual and

skilled labor. Commerce in the border provinces has been greatly stimulated by Afghan entrepreneurs -- not to mention the enormous influx of foreign currency and material resources from abroad for the support of the refugees and the resistance. Yet, despite good relations, Pakistani press editorials have blamed the refugees for numerous economic and social ills, from uncontrolled urban growth and skyrocketing prices, to prostitution, theft, and the proliferation of illicit weapons and narcotics smuggling. The return of thousands of Pakistani workers from Iraq and Kuwait has cost Pakistan hundreds of millions of dollars in remittances, and has heightened competition for jobs in a labor market that is already tight. Given Pakistan's deteriorating economic situation, local tensions are likely to increase.

The extended presence of several million Afghans has also had a great impact on the environment and local resources in western Pakistan. Large areas of semi-arid land have been deforested because of the increased demand for fuel and building materials; rangelands have been overgrazed by refugee livestock herds; water tables have been lowered; and soil erosion -- already a serious problem in the region -- has become endemic.

In general, the Afghan leadership has supported the Government of Pakistan (GOP), aware of its liberal treatment of Afghan refugees, and its support for the Islamic resistance. Yet, frustration over the stalemated civil war and the seemingly unending Afghan refugee exile has greatly increased since Soviet forces withdrew. Warning that Afghans can never accept foreign interference, even from old friends, many sources have worried in private that Islamabad may have its own political agenda for steering the course of Afghanistan's future.

Refugees in Iran

Unlike Pakistan, Iran is a party both to the 1951 U.N. Convention and to the 1967 Protocol. Those Afghans in Iran prior to the events of 1978-79 -- many of them working age males -- were recognized by the UNHCR and Tehran as refugees *sur place* after the Soviet invasion. There has long been a substantial amount of trade and migration back and forth across the border between Afghanistan and Iran. Traditionally, impoverished Afghanistan was a source of migrant labor for Iran, especially during the oil-boom years of the early 1970's. It is estimated that there were anywhere from 600,000 to 1 million Afghan workers residing in Iran at the time of the communist coup in April, 1978. Since the Soviet invasion, they have been joined by upwards of one million refugees. As in

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AFGHANISTAN:
TRENDS AND PROSPECTS
FOR REFUGEE REPATRIATION

FOREWORD

Peace is at hand in Afghanistan after 13 years of conflict. Today, Mr. Mojadiddi arrived by caravan in Kabul to assume leadership of the government. His statements about the suffering and devastation he saw en route from Peshawar to Kabul is moving testimony to the challenges that lie ahead for him and his government.

This moment of peace has arrived with great difficulty. The restraint recently exhibited by external powers from intruding in the Afghan negotiations; the cajoling, persistence and encouragement of the United Nations mediators; and, most of all, the will of Afghan leaders themselves to achieve peace are the reasons peace has arrived at long last.

But, how long it will last is dependent on these same factors and many more.

More than five million Afghans live in exile in Pakistan and Iran. For more than a decade now, this has represented the world's largest refugee exodus. There is no doubting that the more secure the peace is the more refugees there are who will want to return to their country.

This return of refugees will be one of the major products of peace. When, how, where, in what numbers, at what pace and with what help the refugees return will, conversely, be one of those major factors that will determine whether the peace can be sustained.

It was with these important interconnections in mind between peace and refugee repatriation that we approached the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) for grant resources to conduct a research project. What started out as a 12 month project extended to a project that ran for more than two years on an intermittent basis as the prospects for both peace and refugee repatriation waxed and waned. To sustain our efforts in this area beyond the initial grant from USIP, the United Nations Office on the Coordination of Assistance for Afghans (UNOCA) made resources available to investigate the question of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan. And, RPG joined with the University of Manitoba, with financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency, to conduct further field work, to update our information and findings as well as to report them at a workshop held in December 1991 on Afghan repatriation.

As anxious as most Afghan refugees are to return home from Pakistan and Iran (and as anxious as these countries are for many of the refugees to return home), the decision to actually return will be made with difficulty. This, coupled with the potential destabilizing effects of a mass repatriation that the country is unprepared for, underscores how important it is that a range of options be kept open for addressing the opportunities that peace brings for resolving the Afghan refugee problem. It is our hope that this report will help frame the issues to be addressed in this next difficult, but hopefully final, chapter concerning Afghan refugees.

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April 27, 1992

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This report was written by Refugee Policy Group Program Associate Michael Knowles, based on interviews in Washington, New York, and Geneva and field work in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mr. Knowles undertook field work in Pakistan and Afghanistan in September-November 1990 and June-July 1991.

Throughout the project, RPG Executive Director Dennis Gallagher, Senior Associate Susan Forbes Martin, Senior Advisor Jacques Cuenod and Consultant Thomas Greene contributed to the research and analysis, conducting interviews, drafting sections, and editing the final document.

RPG held a number of meetings during the project designed to stimulate discussion of the major issues covered in the analysis. The project was conceived at a conference on Afghan return organized by RPG on the eve of the Soviet withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Several subsequent meetings featured presentations and discussion with individuals knowledgeable about the Afghan situation, including Mr. Benon Sevan who has had the lead role for the United Nations in negotiating an Afghan peace. A draft of the report was presented at a conference organized by the University of Manitoba in December 1991. The report was revised to take the meeting discussion into account and was updated to incorporate recent developments.

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